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Patterns of employment and independent living of adult graduates with learning disabilities and mental retardation of an inclusionary high school vocational program

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Abstract

Vocational/employment and independent living for individuals with disabilities has been a major area of interest for those interested in transition from school to work and adulthood. Recent statistics for such individuals continue to be poor and problematic. The present study investigated a group of adults with either specific learning disabilities or mild mental retardation who had graduated or exited an inclusionary high school which emphasized vocational technology training and independent living skills. The results indicated higher than the national average for employment and rate of pay as well as stronger than expected indicators of independent living in terms of mobility. The largest group of individuals, however, were still residing with their parents. Respondents with learning disabilities were doing better than their mentally retarded counterparts in terms of many of the indicators but individuals with mental retardation were still doing strongly when compared against figures reported in other studies. Results are discussed in terms of recommendations for generalization as well as the educational model used for these students.

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1. Introduction

During the last 25 years, individuals with disabilities have been encouraged to pursue education that will lead to appropriate adult normalization and full participation in life

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(Clark & Kolstoe, 2000). Special education laws such as IDEA, Section 504 of the Vocation Education Act of 1973, and the Americans for Disabilities Act (ADA) mandate transition services that will facilitate both vocational procurement and independent living in the community (Huefner, 2000).

However, the success of individuals with disabilities in gaining meaningful and financially sufficient employment and also maintaining their independence in the community remains a problem (MacMillan, Barlow, Widaman, & Borthwick-Duffy, 1990). Studies have indicated that the vast majority (as high as 75%) of individuals with mild disabilities are unemployed or underemployed even as long as 3 years after graduating high school (Affleck, Edgar, Levine, & Korterling, 1990; Frank & Singleton, 2000; Sitlington & Frank, 1993). While employment statistics for individuals with disabilities may be improving somewhat, much improvement is still needed (Frank & Singleton, 2000).

When issues of independent living for individuals with disabilities are explored, the picture is not much better. Studies have indicated that most adults with disabilities remain both single and living with their parents (Lindstrom & Benz, 2002; Sitlington & Frank, 1993). Such individuals are often isolated socially with few friends and even fewer meaningful relationships with same-age peers (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2001; Stacy, 2001).

However, many of the studies where these relatively grim statistics originated were in environments where students with disabilities had attended regular high schools and were enrolled in either primary academic programs or in academic programs with part-time vocational education training. Studies in which students were enrolled primarily in vocational programs in their high schools are harder to find but those available yield more hopeful and/or optimistic employment statistics for people with disabilities (Anderson, Kazmierski & Cronin, 1995; Hasazi, Johnson, Hasazi, & Gordon, 1989). Even rarer but perhaps more hopeful still would be special needs students who spent the majority of their school day in an inclusionary vocational high school designed specifically to make their graduates job ready.

Why might such a high school environment designed to specifically train regular and special needs students for the workplace yield higher employment statistics than the regular high school academic environment? Lindstrom and Benz (2002) assert that students with disabilities find themselves in one of three career phases: unsettled, exploratory, or focused. It may be that an inclusionary high school program that focuses on vocational training and preparation help students move quicker through the first two phases of career development and spend relatively more time in the third phase (focused) which prepares the student for the specialized roles and tasks that the student will need in his/her particular job cluster.

Another under-investigated area of inquiry is the extent that inclusionary vocational high school training not only prepares special needs students for jobs but also contributes to their independent living and normalization activities. Such activities might include obtaining and maintaining housing, increasing mobility via owning a car or utilizing public transportation, and engaging in meaningful social and recreational activities (Benz & Halpern, 1993). It would be of value to explore whether enrollment in such a life-skills focused learning environment would contribute to these additional and vital behaviors of independence and normalization.

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